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ABSTRACT

The paper describes an interactive evaluation process based on E. Brown's transactional evaluation model, and its application to evaluating programs serving children with severe and multiple disabilities or other low incidence populations. The model emphasizes the first part of the assessment process, determining which questions to ask and what kind of information can provide suitable answers. Individualization of the evaluation design is accomplished through structured interactions with interested parties. Such meetings allow program staff, students, parents, administrators, advocates, and others to participate in the evaluation design. Subsequent meetings with these same parties allow for additional input and improve prospects for implementing change. (Author/CL)

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Interactive Evaluation of Educational Programs Serving Students with Severe Disabilities[1]

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Abstract

This paper describes an interactive evaluation process based on Brown's (1978) transactional evaluation model. The process is well suited to evaluation of programs serving children with severe and multiple disabilities or other low-incidence populations. This model places emphasis on the first part of the assessment process, determining which questions to ask and what kind of information can provide suitable answers. Individualization of the evaluation design is accomplished through structured interactions with interested parties. These meetings allow program staff, students, parents, administrators, advocates, and other interested parties to participate in the evaluation design. Subsequent, meetings with these same parties allow for additional input before recommendations are developed and improve the prospect of implementation of change.

Interactive Evaluation of Educational Programs Serving Students with Severe Handicaps

Brown (1978) proposed a transactional model of school evaluation which used structured interactions with interested parties to establish the content of an evaluation. This model of evaluation has been applied successfully to evaluation of school programs serving students with severe and multiple handicaps. This paper discusses the evaluation process, with emphasis on the development of evaluation questions and standards. Since some changes have been made in Brown's model, the term "interactive" is used (rather than "transactional") to minimize confusion between his original model and this application.

During the 1980's, increasing emphasis on efficient utilization of limited and sometimes shrinking resources has increased the demand for meaningful evaluation of educational services. The small size, individualized curricula, and student-centered objectives associated with programs designed to serve students with severe and multiple disabilities require an evaluation process tailored to the specific program. An interactional evaluation model provides a method of fitting the evaluation to specific program characteristics and goals.

Interactive evaluation uses a number of traditional methods associated with various evaluation models to answer relevant questions, but differs from traditional models in its method of formulating these questions. It utilizes structured interactions between the evaluator or evaluation team and key individuals (e.g., administrators, program staff, parents, and students) along with empirically verified effective instructional parameters to develop a plan for evaluation.

The term, "program evaluation," is in itself potentially misleading. It implies that an entire program is assessed in some way, but programs, like people, are complex individuals, and unless evaluation is limited to a specific subset of characteristics, the process often becomes unmanageable and the product often becomes uninterpretable. Therefore, one of the first and most important tasks in any evaluation is to determine exactly which characteristics to evaluate, or to put it another way, exactly which questions to ask.

Almost any legitimate question may be asked in some form, but each should be carefully considered to ensure (1) that there is agreement about the importance of the question, and (2) that information used to answer the question can be identified, and (3) that the required information is accessible. For example, student outcome data is considered important in most evaluations. Most often this is identified as some specific measures of student progress over time. These measures are typically available as formative or summative data from on-going programs. In some cases, however, very little data is available to use. If at least a single, suitable assessment of student performance is available from an earlier, identifiable point in time, it may be used as a pretest measure and compared with a postest measure taken during the evaluation to measure progress. Although less helpful than formative data (taken daily during each program), this can provide a reasonable measure of progress. Without such an earlier measure to serve as a pretest, however, a meaningful assessment of student progress becomes impossible, unless the evaluation period is several months long. In such cases, the evaluation team may need

to determine that they cannot answer this question and consider options (e.g., extending the duration of evaluation activities so the question can be answered or restricting the evaluation to other questions). Such unanswerable questions may suggest other important evaluation questions (in this case, "Are on-going student progress measures adequate?").

DETERMINING EVALUATION QUESTIONS

The content of evaluations may be determined by a number of different sources. Sometimes, evaluators independently decide what to assess, based on what they consider to be of interest or their knowledge of current research and practice. Sometimes, evaluation funding sources clearly specify what must be evaluated. Often, administrators, program staff, parents, advocates, service consumers, and other interested parties would like to have particular concerns addressed in evaluation.

Interactive evaluation places more emphasis on determining content than traditional evaluation on content selection. This requires meetings with all interested parties to establish an evaluation plan prior to subsequent evaluation activities, and continued meetings with these groups at critical stages during the evaluation. A basic sequential outline of activities (emphasizing interactions with interested parties) might include:

(A) Develop evaluation timeline

(B) Determine interested parties

(C) Meet with interested parties

1. Explain process

2. Determine questions and standards

(D) Circulate questions and standards for review and approval

(E) Collect evaluation data

(F) Draft preliminary findings

(G) Circulate findings to interested parties

(H) Meet with interested parties

1. Discuss findings
2. Consider revisions
3. Consider possible recommendations

(I) Revise findings if appropriate

(J) Write preliminary recommendations

(K) Circulate to interested parties

(L) Meet with interested parties

1. Discuss recommendations
2. Consider revisions

(M) Write final recommendations

(N) Meet with interested parties

1. Present final report
2. Discuss implementation

(O) Circulate final report

Since this requires meetings with interested parties at at least four stages, some extra time may be needed, and a detailed timeline is essential to coordinate activities in a reasonable period of time. Brown (1978) suggests a good method for breaking down the evaluation process into tasks, activities, and transactions. This method is illustrated in the example shown in Figure 1. Times can be assigned to transactions to complete the timeline process.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Determining who the interested parties are is usually simple, since typically these people already interact with the program. Asking the program staff, administrators and parents who are immediately accessible about other interested parties may help identify additional sources. Once these parties have been identified, the evaluation team must decide whether to try to meet with them together as one large group or in several smaller sessions. Meeting as one large group avoids having to integrate the results of several smaller meetings, reduces the number of meetings required, and encourages communications between interest groups, but often smaller meetings are better because ideal times for various groups (e.g., parents and teachers) are different, better participation occurs in smaller groups, and shorter meetings draw better attendance.

Once participants are identified and meetings begin, an evaluation plan can be developed. As each evaluation question is developed, standards for answering the questions, sources of data, and instruments for collecting data must be identified. Figure 2 illustrates a sample plan. It is important to note that while this information must be specific enough to provide direction, it is not as specific as the actual data collection instruments.

Insert Figure 2 about here

FINDING THE ANSWERS

Usually, the best data involves direct measurement of behavior. For example, teacher or student instructional time can be observed directly. Some questions, however, cannot be answered easily through direct observation and are better measured through survey data. It may also be important to assess the social validity of empirical data. For example, parental satisfaction with the program is best assessed by interview or survey, and although student progress should be empirically measured, teacher and parent perceptions of student progress may also be of interest as a social validation measure. Figure III provides an example of a survey instrument. Since some elements of a number of different evaluation

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Insert Figure 3 about here

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questions are addressed through each survey instrument, these instruments should not be selected or developed until the entire evaluation plan is completed.

Once the evaluation plan and instruments are fully developed the evaluation team can use whatever means methods and models that seem most appropriate. Discrepancy evaluation is a popular and useful approach which looks at the match or lack of match between the program and standards (Steinmetz, 1983), but there are many useful strategies for using data to answer specific evaluation questions. An electic approach allows the evaluators to use the best evaluation model for each question to be answered.

The additional interactions that occur after the preliminary findings allow interested parties to participate in making recommendations. Their participation at this stage may result in better recommendations, and also helps ensure that greater participation in the implementation of recommendations that follows.

References

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Figure 1

Breakdown of Evaluation Tasks [Excerpt]

TASK:	Design Evaluation	No. 1
SCOPE:	Determine Evaluation Questions	
PURPOSE:	To identify questions that reflect the concerns of administration, staff, parents and advocates	

ACTIVITIES:	TRANSACTIONS:	
Literature Review for evaluation questions	1.0	Review policies and guidelines
	1.1	Review Alberta Education program policies and guidelines
	1.2	Review ECSD guidelines and policies for D.H. program
	2.0	Review current educational literature
Interaction with interested parties for generating evaluation questions	3.0	Meet with interested parties
	3.1	Meet with ECSD administrators
	3.2	Meet with evaluation steering committee
	3.3	Meet with parents of students in D.H. program
	3.4	Meet with D.H. program staff
Communication with advocacy groups for generating evaluation questions	4.0	Communication with advocacy groups
	4.1	Send draft evaluation plan to advocacy groups with request for suggestions
	4.2	Incorporate suggestions into evaluation plan

(Sobsey, 1985; after format of Brown,1978)

Figure 2

Excerpt from Evaluation Plan

EVALUATION PLAN

QUESTION	STANDARD	SOURCE	INSTRUMENT
1.0 Does the program provide a social-emotional climate supportive of learning development of self-esteem?	1.1 Teacher attitudes and expectations are positive.	teachers	teacher survey
	1.2 Non-program school staff attitudes are positive.	staff	staff survey
	1.3 Non-handicapped students attitudes are supportive.	non-handicapped students	interview notes
	1.4 High ratios of reinforcement and error correction are maintained.	direct observation	videotape and evaluators notes
	1.5 Staff-pupil interaction rate high when compared to staff-staff interaction.	direct observation	videotape and evaluators notes
	1.6 Staff maintain physical proximity and contact with pupils.	direct observation	videotape and evaluators notes
	1.7 Parents report children "enjoy" school program.	parents	videotape and evaluators notes
	1.8 Teaching staff rate interactive components of job as desirable.	teachers and aides	videotape and evaluators notes
	1.9 Opportunities for social interaction are maximized.		

(Sobsey, 1985)

Figure 2 (continued)

EVALUATION PLAN

QUESTION	STANDARD	SOURCE	INSTRUMENT
18.0 Are integration and normalization occuring to the greatest extent possible?	18.1 School includes non-handicapped peers. 18.2 School allows students in dependent disabled program to attend part-day programs in other categorized classrooms. 18.3 Students in dependent disabled program have established pathways to graduate into other programs in school and/or system. 18.4 Setting is age appropriate. 18.5 Activities are age appropriate. 18.6 Non-academic activities are integrating students.	Administrators Parents Teachers Program staff Direct observation	Request letters Parent survey Teacher survey Evaluators notes

(Sobsey, 1985)

Figure 3

Excerpt from Survey Instrument

TEACHER AND AIDE QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What is your position?

   a) teacher b) aide c) other (please specify) _____

2. How long have your worked in this program?

   _____ years _____ months

3. What experience did you have with students with severe and multiple handicaps before coming to work in this program?

4. What experience did you have in other areas of special education before coming to work in this program?

5. What experience did you have with regular education before coming to work in this program?

6. What training did you receive which provided specific preparation for you to work with students with severe and multiple handicaps? When did you receive it?

7. What other special education training did you receive? When did you receive it?

8. What other general education training did you receive? When did you receive it?

(Sobsey, 1985)

Figure 3 (continued)

9. How adequately do you feel your training prepared you to work with students with severe and multiple handicaps?

fully prepared	well prepared	adequately prepared	inadequately prepared	mostly unprepared	completely unprepared

10. How important are individual program plans for the education of your students?

extremely unimportant	rarely useful	sometimes useful	frequently useful	extremely important

11. How important are periodic assessments of overall performance for your students?

extremely unimportant	rarely useful	sometimes useful	frequently useful	extremely important

12. How important is daily collection of data on each program for your students?

extremely unimportant	rarely useful	sometimes useful	frequently useful	extremely important

13. For each of the living situation categories listed below, write in the number of D.H. students that you currently work with that you think might eventually live in that category.

a) total independent _____

b) semi-supervised group home/competitive employment _____

c) supervised group home/sheltered employment _____

d) total group home or parental supervision _____

e) institutional care _____

14. a) How much integration of activities occurs between students in the D.H. program and their non-handicapped peers.

no integration	very little	little	some	a lot	integration

(Sobsey, 1985)